In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a wonderful phrase in last Sunday’s Ascension Gospel. It is a phrase which, to my mind, just begs to be explored and enjoyed. It is the phrase “with power from on high.” Jesus is speaking with his disciples. Just before he ascends into heaven, he says this to them:

49And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49, RSV)

That would be great! To be clothed with power from on high! This is the idea I hope we will explore and enjoy.

The disciples do as they are instructed. They stay in the city, Jerusalem, for ten days. Then the mighty things we celebrate today, Pentecost Sunday, take place. The disciples are indeed clothed with power from on high—so much power that when Peter preaches to the people of the city that day, he wins three thousand people to Christ. The happy verse in Acts Chapter 2 goes this way:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41, KJV)

That was some preaching for this fisherman! This old fisher of fish has become a powerful fisher of humanity, to the tune of three thousand souls that day when the Holy Spirit was moving so strongly.

This is what the Holy Spirit does: He clothes people with “power from on high.” He gives them the ability to do what they could not do before—what would not have made sense before. How else can we explain twelve fishermen conquering the world? Unlettered, unacquainted with the halls of power, with no military power to back them up, used to the marshes of the river and sea as they do their fishing... how could such plain working men have converted the world to Christianity without the help of the Holy Spirit, without being clothed “with power from on high”? How could they dare? How could they risk life and limb for Christ? How could they face and accept martyrdom for him if it were not the case that the Holy Spirit was strong in their lives? The Holy Spirit was indeed strong in the apostles. And let us so
open *ourselves* to the power of the Holy Spirit that we too will accomplish something wonderful for Christ in the years that lie ahead of us.

In one of the sermons of Bishop William Lazareth, now of blessed memory, he spoke of a modern case of being clothed with power from on high. I have loved the story he told, and I have wanted to save the story for a Sunday like this—a Sunday when we have our three dear Confirmands about to be Confirmed. It is a story about the transmission of faith—about one generation picking up and carrying on for the preceding generation. But it is also a story about being clothed with power from on high:

[Bishop Lazareth] told the story of a Lutheran pastor he met in Bavaria after the [Second World] War. That pastor told how his father, a pastor also, was serving near Dachau and began speaking out against what everyone knew was going on inside those razor wire fences. As that pastor’s father ascended the pulpit to preach his Easter Sunday sermon the sound of clicking heels could be heard on the stone of the church aisle as the Gestapo and the SS entered the pulpit and arrested that pastor’s father. As they dragged him down the aisle the father passed his son sitting in the pew. He handed him the gospel book and said: “I have finished, now you must begin”. And as the Gestapo dragged the pastor away, never to be seen or heard from again, the boy stepped into the aisle and began to read the Easter Gospel.¹

We must not separate the Holy Spirit from the work he does. The work of the Holy Spirit is to give us power from on high. If we have the Holy Spirit then we have such power. It waits to be used. And if we are *baptized*, then we have the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was poured out on us in the sacrament. What awaits is that we should use our power to do something Christ-like in this world. That brave pastor in Bishop Lazareth’s sermon did that. So did his son. They heard the click of the Gestapo heals on the church floor and still they went on preaching the gospel. They were not deterred by the danger. The Holy Spirit had been given to them in their baptisms, and life had so worked itself out that they found themselves in a situation that called for them to act on the power from on high that had lain ready and willing to be used by them.

Let me propose a simple explanation for the words “power from on high.” I propose that such divine power should be thought of chiefly as “freedom to get up and do what needs to be done.” When you were baptized you were

¹ From the sermon preached by Rev. Rodney Eberhardt at the memorial service for Bishop William Lazareth, April 26, 2008.
given freedom by God to get up and do what needs to be done. You were given freedom that you did not have before. You were given a reason for courage that you did not have before.

Note that in speaking of freedom to do the right thing, we are not speaking of necessity or inner compulsion, nor of muscles. To be clothed with “power from on high” does not mean that we must get up and do what needs to be done. It does not mean that we cannot turn and walk away if that is what we want to do. It simply means that we can do the right thing. It is rational and right for us to do so. We are free to do so.

Likewise, “power from on high” does not mean that we suddenly grow strong, like Samson of old, so that we can easily do what was hard before. No, our nature and talents remain the same. When the Gestapo led away the pastor, he did not suddenly grow strong to overthrow them. And yet the man was indeed filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Anyone looking on could see that. He had power from on high to do the right thing. He had freedom for the good and, bless him, he exercised that freedom.

So that is one point: the definition of divine power as divine freedom to do the good, does not mean that we must do the good, that we cannot avoid it, or that we are suddenly strong to do the good. It simply means that we have the freedom to do it. So let’s do it!

And so let us shift the view toward that, toward the personal responsibility freedom places on us to do something good with our faith in Jesus. Having power from on high means that we have both ability and responsibility for the good. I mean, it would have been nice if power from on high meant that we suddenly become like a tornado, knocking down everything in sight for the Lord. But it does not mean that. Rather it means something that still leaves a huge question before us—a question that only you and I can answer. The question is, how much does it mean to us that Jesus died for us, that he is risen from the dead and that we rest safe and secure in his arms?

After all, it is possible for us to live much of our lives not really obeying the Holy Spirit. It is possible to go through long stretches of life in which we do not pay much attention to that voice within our hearts that says, “Be brave. Try to do what needs to be done, because even if you fall along the way, still there is Jesus to pick you up—indeed, to pick you all the way up into heaven if need be.” And so it is possible for us to live life without much adventure, without much exercise of power from on high. It is possible for us to live a tame life, but in the years that remain to us, we are in fact free to get up and do what needs to be done in the name of Jesus. That’s what the apostles did. That’s what those plain fisherman from so long ago did: they did what needed to be done, in the confidence that Jesus would pick them up if they were to fall. And look what they accomplished. It was magnificent. And we call them saints because of it.
The Holy Spirit is the person of the triune Godhead who keeps the story of Jesus from being a dead story for us. It is possible for the gospel to come in one ear and go out the other, never much making us better. It is not that we think the story untrue. It’s just that for some portion of our life it doesn’t seem to matter to us. But when it matters, then know that the Holy Spirit is moving in your life. It is time to conduct yourself with some power from on high. The good Lord willing, it will not be as dramatic as martyrdom. But it will be a step forward for this world and for God’s kingdom. So, let us be brave, and take that step.

There is a certain song by the Moody Blues that unleashes the same brief conversation in my household every time Carol and I hear it. The song is called “The Other Side of Life.” Whenever that song comes on the radio, I find myself saying to Carol, “Those English people are great! They use words like ‘astray.’” And Carol simply answers, “Yes, Dear.” The verse in the song goes this way:

Let’s lose our way, go completely astray
And find ourselves again ...

Sometimes that is what it takes: sometimes we must lose our way, go completely astray, in order to find ourselves. When the Holy Spirit is moving in us, God is bidding us to lose our way as the ordinary world calculates these things, and in the process of going astray that way, we will find ourselves—we will find an even better self than we have been so far.

If you have been baptized, then something has been given to you that cannot be taken away. I mean perfect freedom to get up and do what needs to be done. If Jesus were not risen from the dead and if you were not entrusted to him in our baptisms, then all kinds of good things in this world would be too risky. It would not be safe and sensible to do them. But for you and me, we can never say that. We can never say that it is safe and sensible to bow out of doing the good that needs to be done. That line of argument has been taken away from us by the fact that we are baptized, and when we were baptized we were given the Holy Spirit, and where the Holy Spirit is there is freedom to do some real good in this world.

So, let us lose our way, go completely astray. Let us say, “Outta my way! I mean to find my truest self — my most Christ-like self. I am on fire with the Holy Spirit. I am combustible with power from on high. I have freedom to do something really good, and I mean to do it!” Let us charge forward in power from on high. Let us press forward in the freedom baptism gives us to say, Come what may, I mean to serve Jesus Christ and to trust the rest to him — to him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.